

High Impact Sales Coaching

A Sales Coaching Guide for Sales Managers



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I. Introduction

Industry research shows that effective sales coaching can dramatically improve the performance of a sales team – in some cases driving up revenues by 20% or more.

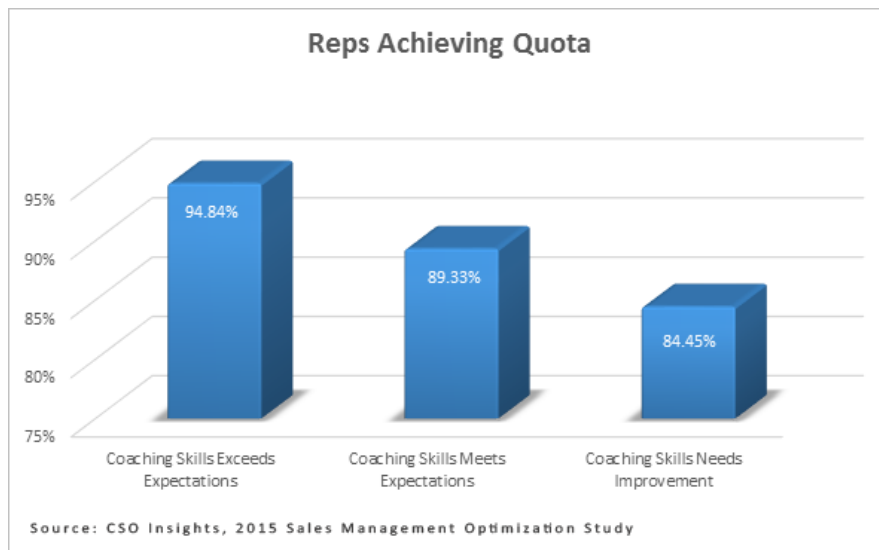
The reason for such potential improvements is the significant “multiplier effect” sales organizations can achieve through sales coaching: one trained manager can coach multiple sales professionals and improve their overall performance. With such potential benefits it is no wonder that many sales organizations recommend that their frontline sales managers spend 25% - 45% of their time sales coaching.

The High Impact Sales Coaching Guide provides expert advice on essential sales coaching skills to help sales managers effectively empower their teams to reach their highest potential.

II. The Why Behind Sales Coaching

by Norman Behar

Sales coaching empowers sales reps to improve selling skills and close more business. Industry research backs this up. For example, CSO Insights has uncovered the relationship between companies that have coaching programs that exceed expectations and the percentage of sales reps achieving quota.



Despite the compelling research, most managers spend the bulk of their time on other activities (e.g., selling, preparing forecasts, attending meetings) and neglect to develop the one skill that can have the biggest impact on sales.

At Sales Readiness Group, we've typically found that managers have four responses when we ask why they're not investing more time in sales coaching:

1. They don't understand the benefits of sales coaching.
2. They don't feel they have enough time
3. They're concerned about hurting a sales rep's confidence
4. They're not sure how to coach

These are all legitimate concerns

Response #1: I Don't Understand the Benefits of Sales Coaching

Industry data is compelling, but it's clearly not enough to prove the impact of sales coaching. Sales managers need to understand why coaching has such a high return on investment. Let's start by defining sales coaching: Sales coaching focuses on helping reps develop the skills, knowledge, and use of strategies that improve sales results.

Based on this definition, the reasons why reps benefit from sales coaching are straightforward. Those who are well coached have better selling skills and strong industry and product knowledge. They also know how to think strategically about sales opportunities to generate higher, more profitable sales.

Response #2: I Don't Feel I Have Enough Time

Sales managers work extremely long hours, especially when you take into account traveling, preparing forecasts, and attending internal meetings.

In most cases, however, a significant amount of their time is spent in their role as chief problem solver, as opposed to "sales enabler." They often find themselves responding to sales reps' requests for assistance to resolve client issues and opportunities. While this may have great short-term benefit in terms of closing more business, it undermines what should be their longer-term objective, which is to help sales reps learn to solve many of these problems on their own.

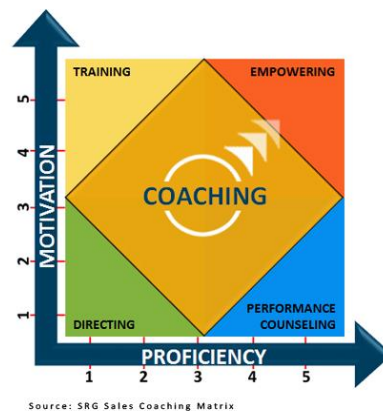
For example, a sales manager may be able to tell a sales rep what he or she should do to advance a stuck opportunity. In doing so, however, that manager has lost the opportunity to allow the sales rep to explain what he or she thinks are the best options, consider other options, and discuss how to best proceed given the alternatives.

While coaching will require more of the sales manager's time in the short term, it ultimately leads to a more productive, empowered, and motivated sales team. In turn, that frees up the sales manager's time.

Response #3: I'm Concerned about Hurting the Sales Rep's Confidence

This concern is warranted if the company lacks a coaching culture and uses coaching as a way to critique bottom performers.

First and foremost, coaching needs to be genuinely helpful and focused on rep development. Second, coaching is rarely successful with reps who have a history of poor performance. Sales coaching is best when focused on middle and even higher-performing reps who have the capacity and desire to improve. The following chart illustrates where sales coaching can have the greatest impact and where other management actions are required.



Coaching is about moving the middle and, ultimately, improving sales rep performance and increasing confidence levels as reps develop even better selling skills.

Response #4: I'm Not Sure How to Coach

While some sales managers may have natural coaching instincts (i.e., a desire to teach and help others succeed), there is no reason to expect that a manager will know how to coach without coaching skills and a coaching process. Fortunately, there are a number of great sales-coaching programs that sales managers can take advantage of, including SRG's High Impact Sales Coaching program.

Becoming a great sales coach requires time and dedication. It is, however, not only worthwhile in terms of business impact, but also in the satisfaction the sales coaches feel as they see their reps' selling skills and confidence grow.

III. Sales Coaching Mindset

by David Jacoby

Sales managers must master the critical skill of sales coaching in order to maximize the sales performance of their teams. The role of a sales coach cannot be over-estimated for any high performing team. One common obstacle that many sales managers encounter when they try to coach their teams is getting “buy-in” – i.e., convincing a salesperson to try a new approach or change a behavior. While it is easy to blame the salesperson in these situations, sometimes it is the sales managers approach to sales coaching that is the root cause of the problem. All too often these managers engage in “telling” as opposed to collaborative sales coaching.

If a salesperson is performing a skill incorrectly, what’s wrong with telling a salesperson what to do? Skills require time, effort and motivation to develop or change. So while telling a salesperson what to do or say may seem expedient in the short-run, it rarely is effective in the long-run. That’s because the salesperson is most likely to listen and change their behaviors if they feel they have been part of the process as opposed to being told what to do. So one of the essential qualities of effective sales coaching is collaboration between the sales manager and the salesperson where both co-create and implement a plan to improve skills – the opposite of telling.

In order to avoid telling and create collaborative sales coaching environment, we recommend that a sales manager enter into each sales coaching conversation with a mindset based on the 3 A’s: (1) **A**sk Before Advocating, (2) **A**ctively Listen, and (3) **A**ssume Best Intentions.

Ask Before Advocating

You have just observed one of your salespeople on a sales call where you saw them make a number of mistakes. You are now ready to sit down with the salesperson and debrief the call. Even if it is obvious to you what the salesperson did wrong on the call, it is critical that you start the debrief process by asking questions. The purpose behind asking questions first is to promote self-discovery by the salesperson, since self-discovery is the most persuasive motivator of behavior change. Even if you eventually

have to advocate your position, such advocacy will be more effective if you start with questions because the process is more collaborative. A salesperson is much more likely to change a behavior if they discover the gap themselves.

Good sales coaching questions to ask include:

What...?

What else did the customer say?

What surprised you about the customer's reaction?

What did you notice when you started asking the customer more questions?

So what...?

So what did you notice?

So what went well?

So what could have been better?

Now what...?

Now what steps would you take?

Now what would you do differently?

Now what questions do you have?

Actively Listen

The only thing worse than not asking questions is asking questions but not listening to the answers. Listening is a great way to help build a collaborative relationship with a salesperson during the sales coaching process. Unfortunately, many sales managers are poor listeners – they feel like they need to do all of the talking. Most successful sales coaches excel at “active listening” which means they are suspending their own thoughts when the salesperson is speaking and focusing 100% on listening to the salesperson.

It is not enough to listen to a salesperson. The salesperson must also FEEL that you are listening to them. Great listeners do this by using such techniques as asking questions, paraphrasing, summarizing and emphasizing.

Assume Best Intentions

Sales coaching should never be viewed as remedial or a punishment for poor performance. Great sales coaches assume that their salespeople want to improve their skills and this helps create a positive environment where the salesperson is motivated to engage in behavior change.

IV. Creating a Collaborative Coaching Environment

by David Jacoby

When most of us think of great coaches, the picture that frequently comes to mind is that of tough, no nonsense “field generals” – Vince Lombardi, John Wooden, or Joe Torre – screaming at players, officials and opponents.

But this is only one aspect of coaching. As fans we usually don’t see how famous coaches are also great teachers during practice sessions, getting their players to buy in to new ideas, techniques, and strategies with a goal of constant improvement.

One of the most essential qualities of effective coaching is that it’s highly collaborative. Why be collaborative, why not tell people what to do? Because telling rarely leads to long-term behavior change.

Collaboration is key to transferring the “heavy lifting” of changing behaviors from the coach to the person being coached. When someone feels that they are an active participant in the coaching process, that person is more willing to make the time commitment necessary to change their own behaviors. This is just as true with star athletes as it is with salespeople.

So what can you do to create a more collaborative sales coaching environment?

Co-define coaching outcomes

A great way of getting the salesperson’s buy-in is to co-define the coaching outcomes with the salesperson.

Start the coaching process by co-assessing the salesperson’s sales behaviors and jointly identify the salesperson’s strengths, development needs and areas where

you have disagreements. Then co-define which behaviors will be addressed during the sales coaching process.

Many sales managers have an aversion to co-defining coaching outcomes. After all, if a salesperson on your team is executing a skill incorrectly, just tell them to fix it. But remember, no one likes to be told what to do and salespeople are no exception. That is why just “telling” often results in resistance and not behavior change.

Establish clear roles

One of the most common forms of sales coaching is when the sales manager observes a salesperson in action on a sales call and then provides coaching feedback after the call. In order to ensure success of such coaching calls, and to prevent the sales manager from jumping in and taking over the call (a common occurrence), it is essential that the sales manager and salesperson establish clear roles prior to the call.

As a sales manager, there are three types of sales calls that you can go on with a salesperson:

1. **Joint Call:** The most common type of call. Here you are accompanying the salesperson on the call to help them sell. For example, the salesperson needs help with a large, complex opportunity. This type of call is the least desirable from a coaching standpoint.
2. **Coaching Call:** The most effective type of sales call. Here the salesperson sells and you are the observer. You observe best when you're not involved.
3. **Modeling Call:** The third type of call where you sell and the salesperson observes. This is appropriate for a new salesperson that doesn't yet have experience or confidence. This approach will also work for someone who has a persistent development need that you can best address by demonstrating the “right” way.

By understanding which type of joint sales call you are going on with the salesperson, you can clearly establish respective roles for the call.

Ask first

Asking questions before expressing your own opinion is critical to effective coaching. The purpose of asking questions is to promote self-discovery.

Sales people will take more ownership of changing their behavior if they feel they are discovering problems and solutions on their own. By asking questions, you help them with this process.

You should express your opinion only after you have made a full inquiry into the salesperson's perspective.

Focus on behaviors, not judgments

When providing coaching feedback it is critically important to focus on behaviors - observable, objective, specific acts or actions – and avoid making judgments.

A Judgment is not helpful to the salesperson, unless it is followed with a specific description of behaviors. If a sales manager says, "You did a great job," there is no specific information about what was great. A better way to say this could be: "You did an excellent job when you responded by clarifying the client's objection by asking, 'are you concerned about the delivery schedule or implementation?' before answering the customer's concern."

This statement tells the salesperson he or she did a good job and describes the behavior upon which the judgment was made. Coaching sales performance is considerably more effective and helpful to the salesperson when it is based on specific, behavioral and observable performance. Not judgments.

V. When NOT to Use Sales Coaching

by Norman Behar

If you want to maximize the performance of your sales team, there is almost universal agreement that you must master the skill of Sales Coaching. This makes sense because sales coaching provides the greatest point of leverage when it comes to improving sales team effectiveness.

Even a small improvement in quota attainment can make a huge difference when you multiply that by 7 – 10 sales reps (the typical number of direct reports for a sales manager).

But there are cases when sales coaching is not an appropriate management action.

Sometimes we assume coaching can solve any problem. Unfortunately, that's not the case. For example, you don't coach someone who is chronically late to work.

So how can a manager systematically identify skills and behaviors that are best addressed by coaching rather than by other management actions?

First, start by assessing the skills of your salespeople. In assessing sales skills, it is helpful to think about this from both a proficiency and motivation standpoint. A skill gap based on proficiency would typically involve a salesperson not being able to perform a skill because they don't know how, whereas motivation gets to a lack of desire.

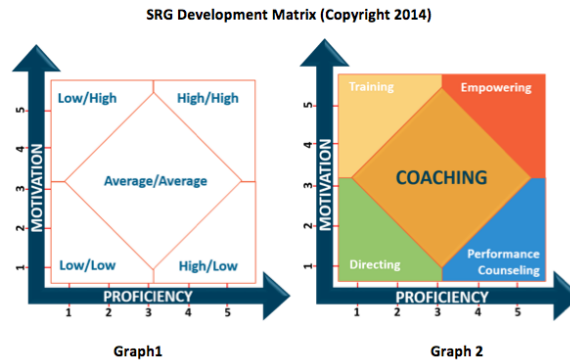
As an example, a seasoned sales professional may have: excellent prospecting skills (high proficiency) but absolutely no desire to make cold calls (low motivation).

Proficiency	Motivation
 Excellent prospecting skills	 No desire to make cold calls

The reason both dimensions (proficiency and motivation) are important is that the combined assessment points to the action the manager should take to address the skill gap.

By plotting these skills on a matrix managers can readily determine what skills to coach, generally where proficiency and motivation are average (*See Graph 1*); and what

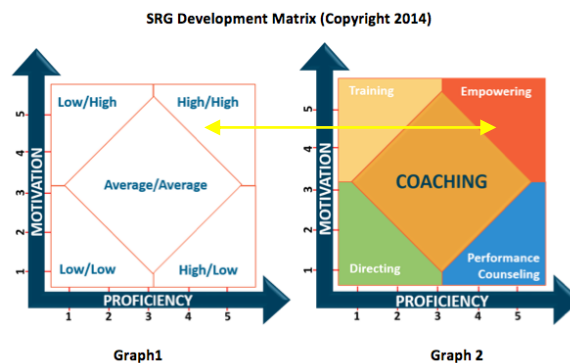
other actions such as directing, training, counseling, and empowering, sales managers should consider when skills require more than coaching (see Graph 2).



The Development Matrix above assumes that you first conduct a comprehensive skills assessment of a salesperson on a 1-5 scale. Let's see how the Development Matrix can quickly help you determine when coaching is the appropriate management action to improve skills.

Empowering (High/High)

Assume you have a salesperson on your team who is a great negotiator, rating extremely high in both proficiency and motivation. Here we recommend that the appropriate management action is empowerment, not coaching. In other words, you should increase this salesperson's control and accountability.



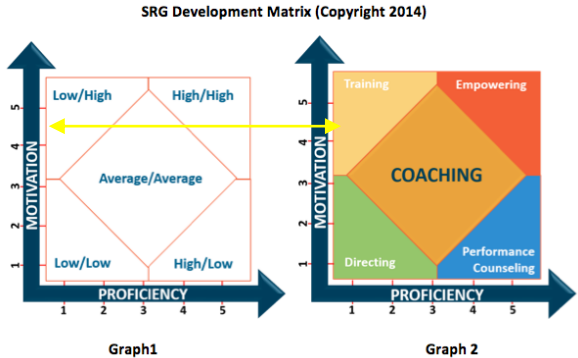
For example, you can do this by expanding the salesperson’s initiative by letting them manage a complex negotiation without your direct involvement.

The benefit to you is that by shifting more responsibility to a highly skilled and motivated salesperson, you create “leverage” by having the salesperson do more of the work (and solving their own problems), thus freeing up your own time.

Caution: some managers have trouble letting go and truly empowering a salesperson, so be careful not to empower with one hand but then take away with the other by micro-managing the details.

Training (Low Skill/High Motivation)

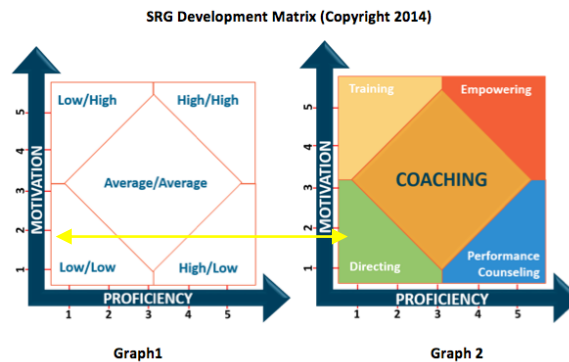
Often with new salespeople we find that they aren’t proficient in many skills, but are nonetheless highly motivated. In these cases, coaching isn’t effective since these salespeople don’t yet have a baseline level of proficiency. Here training is the most effective management action to improve skills.



Training differs from coaching in that it tends to be much more structured and less customized than coaching. Sales training is typically done in small groups, not one-to-one, although ramping up new salespeople may be an exception to this rule. Also, remember that most adult learners forget 80%–85% of what they learn within 30 days of a training event. So to make training effective, you must follow it up with on-going reinforcement, including coaching.

Directing (Low Skill/Low Motivation)

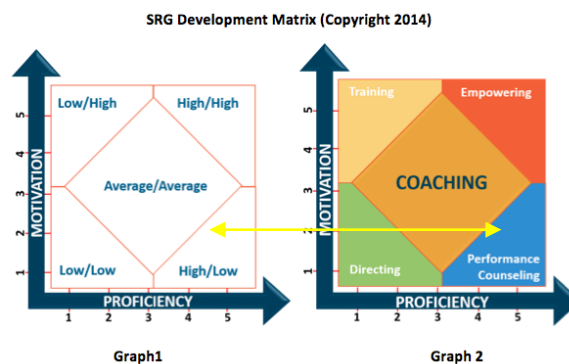
When a specific skill rates low in both proficiency and motivation, you need to direct, not coach. That means give specific instructions on how, what, and when to accomplish a task. In other words, you are telling the salesperson what to do.



As a manager, there are many times when it is appropriate to direct, including when someone is new in their position. That being said, having to continually direct a salesperson is a very inefficient use of time, and it should be used sparingly with high performers who typically don't like to be micro-managed.

Performance Counseling (High Skill/ Low Motivation)

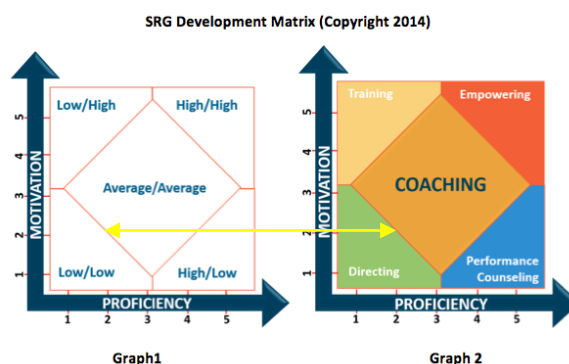
Performance Counseling is appropriate when the salesperson has previously demonstrated high proficiency in a certain skill, but for whatever reason now has low motivation. One common skill area in which we see this is prospecting.



With Performance Counseling, your goal is to investigate and intervene to address motivational or attitudinal issues that negatively impact job performance. Performance Counseling is a complex management action that requires great care. Of course, always contact your HR department before attempting Performance Counseling, and be sure to keep the conversation focused on observable behaviors, not judgments.

Coaching (Average Skill/Average Motivation)

Coaching is the most common management action to develop selling skills because coaching assumes a baseline level of proficiency and is great for fine tuning skills.



That is why the “Coaching Diamond” takes up the most area on the Development Matrix. The reason coaching is so powerful is that as skills go from “average” to “high” they move to the Empowerment quadrant, freeing up your time.

While coaching can’t address every development need, it is highly effective in improving “average” skills. For any sales manager interested in becoming a better sales coach, the Development Matrix is powerful tool that will help you quickly determine the appropriate development action for improving the skills of your salespeople, including when to coach.

VI. Tapping Into Managers' Sales Coaching Abilities

by Norman Behar

One of the primary reasons sales managers neglect to coach their sales reps is that they don't know how. Although this is a legitimate reason, it also tends to overlook the fact that most sales managers already have many of the skills and attributes they need to become great sales coaches.

First and foremost, they need to make sure they have an intrinsic desire to see others succeed. This may not always be the case and, as such, could be the reason many sales professionals are not cut out to be great managers. As a sales rep, their performance was likely measured, compensated, and recognized based on their personal success. As a manager, they now have to take satisfaction in the fact that their success is based on the performance of their team. For many star performers who are used to having the limelight on themselves, this can be too difficult a transition and, as such, they would be better suited (personally and for their employer) to remain in sales.

Assuming they are motivated to help others succeed, their sales experience can also be their greatest attribute. Having succeeded in sales prior to taking a management position provides them with the credibility to offer insights and guidance as a coach. This is particularly true when it comes to Opportunity Coaching which involves helping sales people implement strategies for specific sales opportunities. As an example, this can occur during a weekly review of the sales pipeline with an emphasis on challenging opportunities. In this situation, the manager can actively listen to gain a better understanding of the specific challenge (e.g., competitive threat) and discuss strategies based on their personal experience to advance the opportunity.

A bigger challenge for managers is when it comes to Skills Coaching which involves helping their reps develop better selling skills. At a high level, this involves developing a sales coaching mindset, determining what skills to coach on, and following a defined coaching process.

As part of the coaching process they will need to create (or better yet co-create) coaching plans focused on specific selling skills, observe sales calls, and debrief following the call. Here are few key tips for each of these areas:

Create a coaching plan: While there may be many areas for improvement, it is best to identify 2 – 3 areas for improvement such as identifying priorities or managing objections over some reasonable time period (e.g., a calendar quarter). This is beneficial both for the rep and coach because it keeps the plan highly focused and actionable. Although there may be numerous other areas for improvement, these are best deferred until the initial skills have met expectations.

Observing sales calls (or listening in if you manage an inbound team): Managers often confuse joining reps on sales calls with coaching. It is only coaching if the manager observes (focusing primarily on the key skills identified in the plan) and the rep does the selling. While the manager may comment briefly from time to time, the emphasis needs to be on the sales reps development not helping them sell. That is not to say that there are not times when it is beneficial for both the rep and manager to sell (provided they stick to their roles), or for the manager to lead the sales call (training a new rep), but these are not coaching calls. In a coaching call, the manager observes the customer interaction with an emphasis on the specific areas identified for improvement.

Debriefing following a call: The debrief should take place as soon as practical after the call (potentially even on the car ride to the next call). While the manager may be tempted to immediately share what went wrong or the sales rep could have done better, they need to resist this temptation. Instead, they should offer a few encouraging words about something that went well, and then lead the rep in self-discovery as it relates to the areas for improvement. This will allow for more ownership of the improvement by the rep and more productive coaching conversations.

Ultimately, coaching should be a rewarding experience for the both the sales rep and the manager. Keeping this in mind is the start to a great coaching program.

VII. How to Rescue a Sales Rep During a Coaching Call

by David Jacoby

For a sales manager going on a call with a sales rep, nothing is more painful than watching the rep crash and burn.

The natural reaction is to rescue the sales rep. After all, why lose the sale when all you need to do is jump in and take over the sales call. But is that the best choice? It depends.

Joint Call vs. Coaching Call

Let's first make an important distinction between a joint sales call and a sales coaching call. On a joint sales call, a sales manager's role is to help the sales rep sell. Perhaps the sales rep has specifically asked for help with an account, or maybe the opportunity is so significant that the sales manager wants to accompany the rep on the call "just in case."

The primary goal of a joint sales call is to close business. So on a joint call it is entirely appropriate for the sales manager to take over a call and rescue a sales call if the sales rep is struggling. One point of caution: a sales manager should only go on a limited number of joint sales calls (as opposed to coaching calls). If you find yourself going on too many joint calls, you are in effect doing the sales rep's job for them. A sales manager should be primarily managing, not selling.

By contrast, on a coaching call a sales manager's role is to observe the sales rep in action and then later provide constructive feedback. Ideally, the sales manager would also have a coaching plan for each of their reps, allocate sufficient coaching time, and follow a structured coaching process.

The primary goal for the coaching call is to develop the sales rep's skills. A best practice for B-to-B sales organizations is that the sales manager spends 25%-40% of their time going on sales coaching calls. Why so much time? Because research shows

that sales teams that get consistent coaching produce better sales results than teams that get little or no coaching.

Sometimes, the best coaching happens after a sales rep makes a mistake. In the short run, this can be painful to watch, but in the long run this results in better sales reps.

Defining Roles

Prior to going on a coaching call, the sales manager and sales rep should clearly define their respective roles. On a coaching call the best role for the sales rep is the seller, and for the manager is the observer. Managers can coach most effectively when they're not actively involved in the selling process, focusing their attention on observing how well the sales rep demonstrates a few specific skills and knowledge areas.

In a few limited cases, though, it's better for the sales manager to sell on the coaching call and have the sales rep observe. For example, this is appropriate for a new sales rep that doesn't yet have experience or confidence, or has a persistent development need that a manager can best address by demonstrating the "right" way.

To the Rescue!

But what about "rescuing" the sales rep on a coaching call? If necessary, it should be done consciously, not as a knee-jerk reaction. For example, if what the rep says could potentially have legal or company policy misinformation ramifications, the manager should tactfully provide accurate information, and then turn the call back to the salesperson.

Other factors to consider in deciding when to rescue include:

- Progression of events during call may jeopardize the sale or account relationship
- If stepping in and helping salesperson will seriously damage rep's credibility
- Enhancing or impairing salesperson's development, such as their confidence/attitude

Bottom line: Sales coaching, which includes learning through failure, leads to better sales rep skill development and this improves performance.

VIII. Dealing with Sales Reps Who Don't Want to Be Coached

by David Jacoby

One of the most frustrating aspects of sales coaching is dealing with sales reps who don't want to be coached. We all have managed these types of sales people before. They get defensive when you provide feedback, deny they have a development need or try to deflect the blame for performance challenges.

Do these examples seem familiar?

- “That’s not how we did at [previous employer]...”
- “I don’t know what you’re talking about. The meeting went well.”
- “The problem is I don’t have enough leads.”

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, sales people will resist coaching. When this happens, it is important not to match resistance with resistance. This will only create conflict and not help you achieve your ultimate sales coaching goal of modifying the salesperson's selling behaviors.

The most effective way of managing resistance is by starting with the mildest management intervention and escalating only when necessary. This escalation process is illustrated by the C.O.D.E framework (described below) for managing coaching resistance:

Consider Alternative Solutions

One fundamental mistake sales managers make when giving coaching feedback is not adequately considering the salesperson's perspective. It may be that the salesperson's resistance to your coaching is based on an underlying substantive issue.

For example, you may want the salesperson to prospect using a script developed by Marketing. The salesperson, on the other hand, believes the script sounds contrived and feels uncomfortable using it. Perhaps the salesperson is raising a legitimate point. Rather than argue, why not work with the salesperson to edit the script, putting into his or her voice while maintaining the key points Marketing wants to communicate?

Another consideration is to pick your battles carefully. If the salesperson in our prospecting example is booking a sufficient number of appointments using his or her own approach, it may not be worth the effort to try to get him or her to change the behavior.

The key objective in considering alternative solutions is to avoid unnecessary struggles. If there is a simple and effective way of resolving the difference, use it.

Overcome Resistance

Now, let's continue with our prospecting example. Assume the salesperson is booking a sufficient number of appointments, but the quality of these appointments is low. Through observation you have determined that this salesperson is "badgering" prospects into agreeing to appointments, rather than creating genuine interest.

In this case an acceptable alternative to modifying the salesperson's prospecting behavior isn't available or feasible. You need to address the salesperson's resistance to your coaching by investigating the issue and addressing its source without creating more hostility. Here are a few effective tactics:

- State what you observe. An example of this tactic is "You seem quiet. What's going on?" The benefit of this technique is that it addresses the core issue without making assumptions.
- Boomerang. Here you turn the issue back on the salesperson, "That's a great point. Do you have any ideas about that?" The boomerang tactic helps make the coaching more collaborative as you ask the salesperson for their input.
- Refocus. When a salesperson is trying to deflect your coaching feedback an effective tactic is to refocus the conversation. For example, "You raise a good point about how difficult it is to get through to the decision makers, but let's refocus and get back to how you create interest with the decision maker once you do get through to them."
- Defer. Sometimes dealing with issues as they come up may sidetrack the coaching process, and so it is better to defer these issues, "I get your concern about lead quality. Let's talk about leads at our weekly team meeting."

Directing

If the salesperson still is resisting your coaching efforts, you may want to consider escalating your intervention and directing. Many sales managers confuse directing with barking out orders – i.e., “Do it my way!” Effective directing is a process that consists of the following steps:

- **Describe the specific behavior you observed** – “I noticed that when you prospect you tend to use heavy handed tactics to get the prospect to agree to an appointment.”
- **Identify pitfalls / impact of the behavior** – “In the short run, you get a lot of appointments. However, these are low quality appointments. This is causing your appointment to close ratio to be extremely low.”
- **Reinforce the behavior you WANT to see** – “I want you to use an “Impact Benefit Statement” when you prospect. We covered that in our sales training last month.”
- **Explain the reasons for your directive** – “The purpose of the Impact Benefit Statement is to help you quickly create interest with the prospect. This will lead to more high quality appointments.”
- **Check for understanding** – “Does this make sense?”
- **Talk about next steps** – “Great! As a next step, I want you to write your own Impact Benefit Statement and then let’s go through a few role plays during our one-on-one meeting tomorrow.”

Directing should be used sparingly, especially when coaching high performers.

Employ Other Management Actions

Sometimes, even directing doesn’t work. Maybe your salesperson has the requisite skills to be an effective prospector, but they lack the motivation to prospect consistently.

In these cases, you should consider employing other management actions such as performance counseling in order to understand the root cause of the motivation issue, re-set performance expectations, or, given the fundamental importance of prospecting to a successful sales career, discuss career alternatives (e.g., account management, customer service, etc.).

Sales coaching should never be a struggle between you and the salesperson. It should be a collaborative process and you should be flexible in your approach, tailoring your coaching based on each of salesperson's specific development needs. When you do encounter coaching resistance, remember to use the C.O.D.E. framework.

IX. Six Key Sales Coaching Skills

By Ray Makela

As a Northwest soccer dad, I have had the opportunity to coach and watch hundreds of youth soccer games over the past decade.

One of the biggest challenges I've observed from the sidelines is finding the balance between trying to dictate what should be happening on the field (e.g. do this, go there, etc.), and the need to let the players make their own decisions and learn.

Observing some really great and bad coaches, I have come to the conclusion that coaching youth soccer is a lot like coaching a sales team (no correlation to maturity level intended).

The best coaches/managers I've seen in both disciplines are the ones who were able to focus on a few key priorities and communicate expectations clearly to their team. They are able to observe and develop their "players" without micromanaging.

Here are six critical sales coaching skills that apply in either "game":

1. Communicate expectations & identify key behaviors needed to succeed

Communicating expectations is one of those things that people take for granted. "Isn't it obvious what you're supposed to do?" The response is often "no."

When asked, coaches/managers feel like they set clear expectations, but when you ask the employees/players, they will tell you they're not really sure what's expected.

The focus is often too much on the end result, not on the behaviors that are needed to produce the result. Results show what has already happened, and it's impossible to change them after the game.

The key is to identify and focus on the behaviors needed during the game and then communicate and manage them accordingly.

2. Catch them doing something right

We've all heard we're supposed to provide more positive feedback than negative. Unfortunately, that often sounds more like cheer leading than providing tangible, positive feedback that reinforces the behaviors we're seeking.

Once you've identified those behaviors you want to see, then point them out and reinforce that behavior when you see it. Start with the positive and build on the behaviors you see that contribute to the results you're looking for. Do this often.

3. Provide one-on-one feedback as close to real time as possible

The best coaches I've seen are the ones who don't wait for Monday morning (or the formal performance review) to give feedback. They do it every time someone comes off the field and every chance they get.

This looks like a friendly hand on the shoulder and the non-threatening discussion that says "Great job. You're working hard. Now try to do this and change the way you do that next time and see if it helps improve your result."

4. Let them tell you where they need to improve

An age old tactic that works extremely well is to let the individual and team tell you where they need to improve – at least let them go first in the conversation. We often find that people are very aware and often extremely critical of their own performance, and likely the one or two points they make are right on target.

Spend the time refining (and sometimes tempering) these comments and exploring "what can we do to improve from here?" Not only will they be more likely to "own" the solution, but also they will often surprise you with the suggestions and insights they bring.

5. Prioritize one or two things to work on at a time

It's easy to create a long list of behaviors that need improvement. It's difficult to keep track of so many things and it's painful to look at all the faults at once. If you look

back to the expectations you've set and the behaviors you've identified that will produce the desired results, the performance gap likely boils down to one or two things that if improved would really change the game.

This could be subtle selling skills or personal behaviors, or defending techniques that will shut down the offense. The same concepts apply.

6. Make getting feedback accepted and appreciated

Finally, the best coaches I've observed and the most successful teams are the ones who create a highly collaborative sales coaching environment. They make it okay, even desirable to give and receive feedback.

High-performing teams relish in the fact that everyone is practicing and improving his or her game every day. The star players and newest recruits all get attention and they all receive feedback – with clear priorities for improvement.

It's not punitive, it's not criticism. It's a supportive dialogue about how to improve performance. Talk about it. Celebrate it. Make it infectious to improve, and see if it helps improve the "game".



X. About the Authors



Norman Behar – CEO & Managing Director ([LinkedIn Profile](#))

Norman Behar is a proven sales leader with over 25 years of CEO and senior sales management experience. He is recognized as a thought leader in the sales training industry, and has worked with clients in a wide range of industries including financial services, healthcare, technology, manufacturing, and distribution. Previously, Norman served as President and CEO of Catapult, Inc., a leading provider of personal computer training services, where he oversaw the Company's operations and managed its growth and expansion into more than 20 major markets across the United States. Norman's whitepapers and blog posts are frequently featured in leading sales enablement publications.



David Jacoby – Managing Director ([LinkedIn Profile](#))

David Jacoby has extensive experience developing and implementing innovative sales training and sales leadership development solutions for clients. Previously, David was a Principal at Linear Partners, a sales consulting firm focused on providing sales effectiveness and development solutions to emerging growth companies. In the past, David has served as Vice President of Business Affairs of Xylo, Inc., where he was responsible for the Company's business development, sales operations, legal affairs and financing activities.



Ray Makela – Managing Director ([LinkedIn Profile](#))

Ray Makela has over 20 years of management, consulting, and sales experience. Ray is an industry thought-leader who writes frequently on best practices for coaching and developing sales teams. Ray currently oversees all client engagements for Sales Readiness Group (SRG) as well as serves as a senior facilitator on sales management, coaching, negotiation and sales training workshops. Prior to Sales Readiness Group, Ray served as Chief Customer Officer (CCO) at Codesic Consulting where he was responsible for business development, managing customer relationships, and the development and implementation of Codesic's sales training initiatives. Ray has also held management positions at Accenture and Claremont Technology Group where he was a management consultant and trainer in the Change Management practice.

About Sales Readiness Group

Sales Readiness Group (SRG) is an industry leading sales training company that helps companies develop highly effective sales organizations. Our solutions include comprehensive sales training, sales coaching, and sales management programs that deliver sustainable skills improvement.

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